

Stores and Dance Halls

Ashley Kirkland developed a store, fishing camp, and dance hall at Melrose. Other camps existed below Melrose, and Wood Antee maintained the Friendly Place, a dance hall on Isle Brevelle. Kirkland's Friendly Escape, a larger dance hall, collapsed and was cleared in 1995. Only a site reminds people of Duncan Kirkland's hall below Melrose. Dances became public affairs, held at the "halls," with both local and extraneous "outside" bands. Dances and parties were also held at private camps, especially during election campaigns. Other dance halls like the Green Derby near Lakeview Plantation and Dugas's at Magnolia have also disappeared. Today only the old Metoyer Brothers' bar at Melrose has survived, much beat up by time.

Stores have long existed along the river. The late Collins Roque recalled over twenty stores between Natchez and Cloutierville at one point in time. The Roque Store, now closed and used as an office by the family, is essentially intact. It was a traditional gathering place for the men at Isle Brevelle; they gathered there after Sunday Mass. The Louis Jones and Sonny Jones store, once located near the Melrose bridge, seems to have moved up the river to the site nearer the church and bridge. The Melrose store and post office served the families on the east side of the river and the post office brought in a wider clientele. Today only a cold drink machine sells anything there. A newer store, operated by Mickey Moran, is open on a part-time basis but has only convenience store stock.

The other stores are all closed. The Sammy Balthazar store, open until the 1965, has been razed. Sonny Jones's store burned. Older structures nearer the "point," that area below St. Augustine Church to the dam, seem to have clustered around the 24-Mile Ferry site. Old timers recall the store run by Tante Comete, near the eighteenth-century house now owned by Dr. Anthony Rachal, and documentation has been presented by Gary Mills (1977:130) for an antebellum store run there by the Dubreuil family.

Race tracks existed at the 24-Mile Ferry, near the dam, at Kirkland's dance hall and near the Metoyer Brothers' beer hall at Melrose. Racing was a common activity well into the 1960s. The Balthazar family has maintained a training track near the 24-Mile Ferry and continue to train race horses and jockeys. That tradition among Creoles extends back nearly two centuries.

The decline in stores seems to mirror the shift in demography after the 1930s. As sharecropping declined in practice and families extended, people began to leave the river. After World War II, the presence of successful relatives in Houston, New Orleans, Chicago, and Los Angeles drew Creole youth away. The exodus of southern blacks is echoed in the loss of that population as well. Both Creole and black youth went to Natchitoches and Alexandria, local safety valves for the forced heirship which fragmented the *arpent* system along Cane River. One way or another, though, the Creole families have maintained control over some 14,000 of the original 18,000 acres they had amassed by the end of the

Spanish colonial period. The Melrose Plantation remains the largest block of alienated land, and recently a subdivision on the "point" portion of that place saw young, upwardly mobile Creoles purchasing back even a part of that land. A Creole Chicagoan has purchased back the original eighteenth-century house of Marie Therese Coin-Coin, one of the matriarchs of the Creole community. Not on Isle Brevelle, it is north nearer Natchez.

Major changes on Cane River resulted from the damming of Cane River in 1914. First, the river boats could not come upstream; packet boats still supplied some areas of Louisiana well into the 1930s, but not Cane River. Secondly, the river became a deeper, less ephemeral waterbody, and bridges replaced most fording places and footbridges. Hand-pulled ferries also gradually disappeared, and people crossed the dam and the bridges and "rode around."

Octogenarians remember the ferries; at least four are well remembered, the most famous being 24-Mile Ferry. These ferries continued to operate, under license from the parish government, until at least the 1920s. A ferry at Willow Point was abandoned when landowners objected. It took children across to St. Matthew's School, the first public school for black children on the river since Reconstruction. Its ferry shifted downstream. Bridges replaced the Bermuda Ferry and the Melrose Ferry, and the dam removed the need for the 24-Mile Ferry. Footbridges across the low-water Cane River disappeared, never to be seen again, like the ford that once allowed people to ride horses across at Melrose; the

maintained water levels erased that early, pre-1914 landscape.

Still, as George Stokes (1964) has pointed out, this landscape and settlement preserve some of the most traditional French elements to be found in Louisiana.¹

1. We Know Who We Are: . . . by H. F. Gregory and J. Moran
pp. 76-79